TENNESSEE'S ANCIENT PYGMY GRAVEYARDS: THE "WONDER OF THE WESTERN COUNTRY"

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In July 1820, newspapers first reported the discovery of Tennessee graveyards filled with the stone-lined coffins of a primordial "pygmy race." Over the subsequent two centuries, Tennessee Pygmies became a persistent and recurring part of national and international "archaeological folklore." Despite efforts by antiquarians and archaeologists to disprove these stories, the legend of the Tennessee Pygmies survived those challenges -- eventually entering the nineteenth century literary world as the central plot of two novels. Most recently, the Tennessee Pygmies were resurrected after the discovery of Homo floresiensis in Indonesia as "proof" of an ancient global race of pygmies.

Another problem which perplexed the last generation was the long extinct pygmy race which centuries ago undoubtedly inhabited the Tennessee mountains... (Daily Tribune, 20 Sep 1905, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania)

One of the most persistent and widely published tales about Tennessee prehistory concerns cemeteries of diminutive stone-lined graves containing the remains of a primordial "pygmy race."[1] In July 1820, the *Nashville Whig* (newspaper) published the earliest known account of these mysterious remains -- describing in detail the discovery of hundreds of diminutive graves on several farms near Sparta in White County, Tennessee. In modern parlance, this initial report "went viral" and over the following weeks and months was republished and quoted in newspapers and magazines across the globe-- setting the stage for nearly two centuries of recurring waves of interest in the mysterious and wondrous Tennessee pygmies. The White County pygmies would soon be discovered throughout much of the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee and Kentucky -- the section of the Cumberland River drainage basin to the north of Carthage in Smith County, Tennessee (Birdwell and Dickinson 2004:8). While the story is fascinating in and of itself, it also provides an intriguing example of the history of tension between science and folklore, archaeology and antiquarianism, north and south, urban and rural, and past and present both in Tennessee and on the national scene. In the current analysis, the Tennessee pygmies serve as a prime example of the enduring nature of pseudoscientific explanations in popular culture (*sensu* Feder 2011).

First Wave: The White County Pygmies 1820-1850

As the original report published in the *Nashville Whig* (5 Jul 1820) sets the stage and context for virtually all later discussions, the substantive portions are reproduced herein:

> *On the farm of Turner Lane, Esq., five miles south east of Sparta, on the waters of the Caney Fork of Cumberland, and on other farms adjacent, have lately been found, small graves, sunk into the earth from one foot to eighteen inches below the surface. They are about ten inches broad and eighteen inches long, having a flag limestone rock at each of the ends and sides, and covered with the same species of rock. In these graves are found scull bones, about three inches in diameter, nearly sound : the other bones being proportionally small. Between two and three hundred of these*

graves have been discovered. In every tomb, yet opened, was found a small black earthen pot, about one pint in capacity, containing a small conch-shell, undecayed, of a grey colour on the exterior and red within, and as transparent as this species of shell is usually found. The pot, when broken, exhibits numerous white specks of round shining particles...

At Mr. Anderson's, two miles and a half in a south-westwardly direction from the farm of Mr. Lane, were found other skeletons of the same dimensions, in tombs constructed upon the same plan, and of similar materials. One at least, it is said, was observed to have teeth, and all the bones belonging to the human body.

The facts above stated are attested by Mr. Lane, of White County, who has seen the skeletons very often; by his son, Jacob A. Lane, Esq. of Sparta, in the same county, and by another son, Alexander Lane, Esq., a student at law, who all say they can be verified by all the inhabitants in the vicinity of the farm of Mr. Lane. Mr. Lane the father, who is a man of observation, gives it as his decided opinion, that these are the skeletons of adult persons – He founds his opinion upon the solidity of the bones of the heads, and also upon the fact, of the sutures of the sculls being entirely closed and solid.

The trees growing where they were found, are of as great size and age as any in the surrounding forest.. . The small graves at Mr. Lane's are arranged, but at Mr. Anderson's there is a large burying ground full of them, without any order as to position. That the bones are human, Mr. Lane thinks there can be no doubt, and that they are not the bones of children, he thinks unquestionable.

... The rocks which inclose them, are thin blue limestone, and not of that neighborhood originally, all the limestone in the vicinity being of a grey colour. Here is a mystery that baffles conjecture, and puts all experience at defiance. The stories of the pigmies of Herodotus, on the borders of Ethiopia and the Red Sea, and those of Homer in India, have always been treated as fables, which, in the days of those men, entered into most of their written compositions. At this day, we must outstrip credulity itself, to belief in the real existence of pigmy men. How could a nation of pigmy men, not exceeding eighteen inches in stature, build habitations, clear the forest, cultivate the soil, defend themselves against the ravages of the hawk and eagle, the wolf and the panther?

Signed by the correspondent as "J.H.," the author is certainly John Haywood, one of the earliest historians of Tennessee, who would subsequently champion the pygmy cause. Publication was timely, as the Tennessee Antiquarian Society (TAS) had met for the first time only four days earlier on July 1. Led by Haywood, who was collecting materials for his first two books on Tennessee history (Haywood 1823a, 1823b), this organization is widely acknowledged as the first effort to establish a historical society in the fledgling state (Toplovich 1999). In fact, Michael O'Brien has argued that "The South had no such organization [historical society] until John Haywood founded the Tennessee Antiquarian Society in Nashville in 1820..." (O'Brien 2004:623). One of the stated goals of the TAS was "to institute enquiries into the remains of antiquity in the western country, and particularly in the state of Tennessee" (Tennessee Historical Society Office Files, 1790-1985, THS 455, Box 15, Folder 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives). Lane's discovery was of strong interest to the TAS and a lengthy letter "was read at a meeting and copied in the minute book" (Owsley 1970:228). The discovery was also made timely by the efforts of Ralph E.W. Earl, the confidante and portrait painter of President Andrew Jackson, to establish the first Tennessee museum. From 1818 until 1827, Earl directed the "Museum of Natural and Artificial Curiosities for the State of Tennessee" on the Public Square in Nashville (Kelly 1998). Earl began collecting items as early as 1817 and wrote to Turner Lane soon after the newspaper article requesting that he send some of the pygmy skeletons and artifacts for examination and ultimately for the museum (Owsley 1970:228).

By all accounts, Turner Lane (1762-1840) was a well educated person who served as a teacher in White County for a number of years (Summers 1903:558). After receiving the request for materials from Earl in late July 1820, Mr. Lane undertook "to make some further discoveries among the little Tombs, which seem to be peculiar to this Settlement" (Turner Lane to R.E.W. Earl, Letter of July 28, 1820; Tennessee Historical Society Office Files 1790-1985, THS 455, Box 15, Folder 1). Using an iron rod as a probe, he located and dug four additional small graves (one on his own property and three on the neighboring Doyle farm) and sent packages of human remains, pottery vessels, and shell artifacts to Nashville. In a series of letters accompanying these packages (dated 28 Jul, 29 Jul, 1 Aug 1820), Mr. Lane provided very detailed observations about the graves and their contents. Dissatisfied with what he was able to recover on short notice, he wrote: "My Neighbours are all apprized of my anxiety to obtain full and incontestible proof of the existence of a race of small beings of the human species, who once inhabited this part of the Globe... if at any time to come, we should any of us fully succeed in obtaining a perfect Skeleton, especially a Scull of the usual size; it will be carefully attended to, and forwarded" (Tennessee Historical Society Office Files 1790-1985, THS 455, Box 15, Folder 1). In his final letter, he concluded: "I shall now close my narrative... this Country was inhabited by ... a race of Pigmy Men, whose height did not exceed 2 feet 10 inches, or possibly 3 feet" (Tennessee Historical Society Office Files 1790-1985, THS 455, Box 15, Folder 1). Dr. John Overton, a member of the society, examined the bones and artifacts in Package 1. While reluctant to draw final conclusions from a single skull with an artificially flattened occipital area, Overton reported to the Tennessee Antiquarian Society that the contents appeared "to be the Cranium of an adult human being of ordinary stature..." (Tennessee Historical Society Office Files 1790-1985, THS 455, Box 15, Folder 1).

Within weeks, the *Nashville Whig* article had been republished under the headline "Tennessee Antiquities" in *The Daily National Intelligencer* (25 Jul 1820), the most prominent Washington, D.C., newspaper of the day. By October, versions were also published in the *American Masonic Register and Ladies' and Gentleman's Magazine* (Volume 1, Number 2, pp. 75-76, October 1820). That same month, the White County pygmies crossed the Atlantic with reprinting of the article in *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*, a newspaper distributed weekly in England (24 Oct 1820).

The account of Turner Lane, along with that of other locals, subsequently formed the basis of Judge John Haywood's extensive account (1823a: 200-209) of a race of Tennessee pygmies in his first book on Tennessee history:

> *A number of small skeletons were discovered a few miles from Sparta, Tennessee, in White County, an account of which was given by a Mr. Lane. The graves were about two feet in length, fourteen inches broad, and sixteen inches deep. These extend promiscuously throughout the farm of Mr. Lane, and in a large and closely connected burying-ground in the vicinity; there were others of the same description four miles south of Sparta, and it is said that hundreds of them might be found throughout the locality…From the great number of small graves found here, says Mr. Lane, all of the same description and, among them all, but one being of a large size, it seems to indicate that there was, in ancient times, a race of people whose height was from two feet ten to three feet.*

During the late 1820s, stories of the pygmy graveyard of White County continued to surface, appearing in such widely separated places as Massachusetts ("Ancient Burying Ground," *New Bedford Herald*, Letter of 26 Jun 1826) and Pennsylvania ("Ancient Burying Ground," *Susquehanna Democrat*, 1 Aug 1826), along with a brief article in *Zion's Herald*, which was subsequently reprinted in *The Cherokee Phoenix* (20 Aug 1828).[2]

Due to the widespread coverage of the Tennessee pygmies in newspapers, magazines, and Haywood's treatise, many early travelers visiting Tennessee during subsequent years took time out for side excursions to explore the story. For example, in December 1829, J.W. Post "whilst on the road from Nashville... was induced to spend several days in the neighborhood of Sparta, to gratify the curiosity that had been raised in me, to obtain some evidence of the former existence of those extraordinary beings" ("American Antiquities," *National Daily Intelligencer*, 27 Mar 1829). Mr. Post obtained permission to explore over half a dozen farms for evidence of pygmy graves, cogently noting that "in the course of my research I found skeletons of various sizes, corresponding with the different ages in our own species... it may be reasonably inferred that the greater portion of them never arrive in the age of maturity and very many... do not survive the earliest infancy." During more than a week exploring the area, he was frequently accompanied by six, eight, or as many as a dozen persons and "discovered and examined the time wasted relics of an hundred human beings." He concluded his correspondence with the following observations about the living inhabitants of the region:

> *It may be due from me to the inhabitants of that neighborhood to acknowledge the civility and indulgence I received from them; many of whom, however, were not backward in expressing doubts respecting the propriety of disturbing the repose of the dead... I have no recollection that I have ever been the same length of time, in any other place, where I had intercourse with an hundred inhabitants, from whom I have not heard either profane or offensive language.*

Praise of the local inhabitants was not always to be the norm for outsiders visiting the Sparta area in coming years.

In 1834, George William Featherstonhaugh (1780-1866), serving as the first federal geologist, conducted a resource survey of Tennessee which fell into the region then referred to as "The Western Country" (Berkeley and Berkeley 1988). Featherstonhaugh eventually published an account of his travels as *Excursion through the Slave States*, writing “I had heard of Indian graves of a peculiar kind that were found [near Sparta], and was desirous of inspecting them” (1844:48). Featherstonhaugh visited several of the local farms that had produced small graves – including those creating the initial stir:

> *Mr. Lane and his friends were now convinced – as they still are – that they had discovered an ancient race of pigmies that had been buried in this valley before the existing forest had grown up… they pronounced the skulls and bones to have belonged, not to children of the ordinary Indian race, but to adults of a pigmy race. A book was next written about it, and it became one of the wonders of the western country* (Featherstonhaugh 1844:48).

After opening one of the graves himself and examining other available remains, Featherstonhaugh satisfied himself that they were not the remains of pygmies, but rather bundled secondary burials of normal sized adults. As a scientist, he

could not resist trying to make the case for an alternative interpretation – with little success:

> *Before we parted with Mr. Doyle, I essayed to undeceive him about the pigmy race, and told him it was the custom with a great many tribes of Western Indians to expose their adult dead upon scaffolds, and when all the soft parts had wasted away, the bones of the skeleton were put into very short graves; that if he would consider the size of the oldest skulls he had found, he would see that they had belonged to individuals with as large heads as our own, which would have been both inconvenient and unnecessary to a pigmy race. But Mr. Doyle was not at all pleased to have his wonder taken to pieces in this way, and fought for his pigmies with all the pertinacity of an inventor of genera and species for shells… I regretted my indiscretion, and was determined henceforth to be as careful about interfering betwixt a man and his pigmies as I would be betwixt a man and his wife* (Featherstonhaugh 1844:49).

After leaving Lane and Doyle at Sparta, Featherstonhaugh continued on to Nashville, where he visited several times with Professor Gerard Troost at the University of Nashville. Among many other accomplishments, Troost was a founder and the first president of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia (1812), the first Tennessee State Geologist (1831-1850), and is among the state's best known antebellum scientists (Corgan 1998; Glenn 1905). Sharing interests in both geology and Indian relics, they undoubtedly discussed at length the "pygmy graves."

In 1841, Dr. Samuel G. Morton, considered by some as the founder of physical anthropology in the United States, presented a paper to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia in which he addressed the tales of pygmies:

> *It has long been contended by intelligent persons, who, however, were ignorant of Anatomy, that the adjusted bones of individuals of this race never exceed four feet and half in length, and are often but three feet. These statements induced me to investigate the subject by means of a skeleton of one of these people, which I at length obtained through the kindness of Dr. Troost of Nashville; Dr. A. McCall, an intelligent correspondent of Dr. Troost, having exhumed these remains from a cemetery near the Cumberland Mountain, in White county, Tennessee* (Morton 1842:205-207; 1843:12-122).

He further quoted from a letter from Dr. McCall describing in some detail the discovery:

> *The coffins are from 18 to 24 inches in length, by 18 inches deep and 15 wide. They are made of six pieces of undressed sandstone or limestone, in which the bodies are placed with their shoulders and head elevated against the eastern end, and the knees raised towards the face, so as to put the corpse in a reclined or sitting posture. The right arm rested on an earthen pot, of about two pints in capacity, without legs, but with lateral projections for being lifted. With these pots, in some graves, are found basins and trays also of pipe clay and comminuted shells mixed; and no one of these repositories is without cooking utensils. In one of the graves was found a complete skull, and an os femoris, but most of the other bones were broken in hastily removing them. This is said to be the largest skeleton ever found at any of these burying grounds. It has the cranium very flat and broad, with very projecting front teeth, and appears to have pertained to an individual not over twelve or fourteen years of age* (Morton 1842:205-207; 1843:12-122).

Soon thereafter, Troost published his own opinion on the pygmy graves:

> *they have general burying festivals, when they collect the bones thus preserved, which are then buried; and thence, in my opinion, those numerous small graves, which are attributed, but I believe erroneously, to pigmies. I have opened numbers of these small graves, and have found them filled with a parcel of mouldered bones, which, judging from some fragments I have seen, belonged to common sized men. In one of them I found, amongst*

> *these mouldered bones, two occipital bones -- of course it was a mere mixture of bones, belonging to more than one body...* (Troost 1845:358-359)

Seemingly, these highly respected scientists of the 1840s had finally put the pygmies to rest -- interpreting them simply as the remains of infants and children, or the bundled secondary burials of adults. The pygmies were not, however, to remain at rest for long.

The Second Wave: A National Scientific Issue (1860s-1880s)

Local historians continued to explore the question of Tennessee pygmies throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In 1858, Albigence Waldo Putnam (1799-1869) once again addressed the question in a lecture to the Tennessee Historical Society (THS). One of the founders of the THS, Putnam was also a prominent lawyer, businessman, public official, historian and writer -- perhaps best known for *History of Middle Tennessee or the Life and Times of General James Robertson* (1859). In fall 1858, Putnam explored a number of stone graves at the Two Rivers site (40DV41) at the mouth of the Stones River in Davidson County:

> *An opinion has long prevailed among old settlers in Tennessee that there was once a numerous race of Pigmies here. They assert that they have seen the graves or tombs, made of slate and other thin rock, which were not more than two and three feet long, -- that they have examined hundreds of them, and know the bones were of a diminutive race, -- that they were the bones of full grown and aged persons from the sets of teeth, full or broken, and from other evidences of maturity.*
>
> *These opinions have been urged with much pertinacity, and the chief argument has been "the shortness of the graves or vaults."*
>
> *Judge Haywood, the late Dr.* [William Pitt?] *Lawrence (of our city) and others have insisted upon these views.*
>
> *Some years ago, I was referred to the small tombs at an ancient cemetery on the Sulphur Branch of Obed's river, in Overton County, in this State, as furnishing unquestionable proof of a race of Pigmies buried there.*
>
> *I made an examination: the little vaults were neatly constructed of slate rocks-- were not more than half the length required for the interment of a man of our day, if laid at full length.*
>
> *The bones, (in my judgment) were not the bones of children nor of pigmies but of persons of average height.... The explanation which we have to offer is this... it was customary with many savage or aboriginal tribes, to erect scaffolds or poles whereon to suspend or support a dead body; there it remained, exposed to the weather... until the flesh had entirely disappeared... then the small tombs were prepared and the bones deposited... As we discovered the other day, many of the bones are disjointed and out of position* ("Indian Cemeteries," *Nashville Patriot*, 21 Sep 1858).

Many of Putnam's other observations are equally insightful and strikingly astute for an antiquarian observer of the mid-nineteenth century (Smith 2013b).

Following the Civil War, many former soldiers (both Union and Confederate) with interests in "antiquities" relocated to Nashville and eventually contributed substantially to investigations of local archaeological sites, including notably Joseph Jones (1869, 1876), Gates P. Thruston (1890, 1897), and Edwin Curtiss (Moore and Smith 2009). Following the war, former federal General Robert H. Milroy explored commercial interests in Middle Tennessee, including establishing "Milroy, Waters and Company" -- a mining company prospecting for lead, silver, and oil. Milroy's perception of Confederate sympathizers is perhaps most clearly summarized in a letter to his wife Mary concerning his occupation of Winchester, Virginia: "I can now realize something of the weighty and unpleasant responsibility that rests on a king... my will is absolute

law -- none dare contradict or dispute my slightest word or wish... both male and female tremble when they come into my presence... I feel a strong disposition to play the tyrant among these traitors" (Noyalas 2003:32).

In December 1865, General Milroy wrote a lengthy postscript in a letter to Mary -- describing in detail his discoveries and observations of pygmy graves near Watertown in Wilson County:

> *I forgot to tell you of a great curiosity I found or rather that was shown to me in Wilson Co... We stopped at Watertown, where Ole man Waters one of the best Union men in Tenn. resides. I had to stop there and stay all night, most of a day with them. I had often heard of the remains of human pigmys found in Tenn., but did not believe it. I heard that a number of these remains had been found near Watertown and upon making inquiry was shown a number small bones. About the size of chicken bones but much decayed. Parts of small sculls jaw bones & teeth were among them showing plainly that they were human bones. I then asked to see the graves or place where these bones were obtained & was shown an old field that had been wasted away very much uncovering the tops of several such stone boxes or sarcophagi made by digging a square oblong hole in the ground & laying the flat stone in the bottom, setting up thin flat stones at the sides, ends & laying one over the top. I measured the insides of ten of these boxes & they measured lengthwise from 13 to 16 inches - one was two feet & they measured lengthwise from 13 to 16 inches - one was two feet & all about a foot wide... We dug out the earth of several that had not been disturbed & got a lot of other bones & some teeth. I brought them all to a very scientific physician - the state librarian here & he pronounced them human bones without a doubt & those of adult persons. small rude earthen pots were found in each grave, each broken to pieces on taking them out. There had been two of these pots in the larger 2 foot graves. I learned that there was another place 9 miles off where acres of these pigmy graves have been discovered, and then near the mouth of Stones River on the Cumberland River some 7 miles above this place another still larger collection of these pigmy graves has been discovered. The stones composing all these little sarcophagii are rude thin lime stone slabs picked up without any dressing. I think that these things prove that a race of human pigmies has at one time thousands of years ago existed on this continent & is a great curiosity. The papers of this place have noticed our discovery & you may see some mention of it* (Major General Robert H. Milroy from Nashville to his wife Mary, 3 Dec 1865. Robert H. Milroy Collection, Jasper County Public Library, Rensselaer, Indiana, RHM_1865-16_2a,2b,3a,3b).

General Milroy's observations were indeed published under the byline of "Relics of a Pigmy Race in Tennessee" in the *Nashville Press and Union* (20 Nov 1865) -- mentioning perhaps thousands of pygmy graves near Statesville in the same county and at the mouth of the Stones River. Milroy also deposited some of the bones in the State Library. This article was to be republished multiple times over the next few months, including newspapers in California, Connecticut, and New York.

A.W. Putnam responded in a sarcastic editorial titled "The Pigmy Race in Tennessee" printed in the *Nashville Dispatch* (12 Dec 1865):

> *Some few days since we read in two of our city papers editorial pieces of discoveries made by Gen. Milroy and other gentlemen, of the graves and skeletons of an extinct race of human dwarfs, Lilliputian Aborigines of Tennessee! These small graves had been opened, the bones exhumed and placed in the rooms of the Historical Society at the capital, for the inspection of the curious.*
>
> *We have examined those fragments of a skeleton; the teeth and the portion of cranium (occipital portion) we hesitate not to pronounce to have belonged to some four-legged animal; and never to a human being... the occipital bone belonged not to a creature which held his head erect, like man, but inclined forward, like a dog or wolf...*
>
> *The extensive ancient cemeteries in Middle Tennessee have a notable peculiarity found not elsewhere, that I know of, and it is this*

peculiarity which has led many persons to conclude, hastily, that the race of people buried there, were of small stature, of from two and a half to three or three and a half feet in height.

The fact to which I allude, is that in these burial places, the bones are deposited in tombs constructed of rude undressed flat stones, and are, usually, only of the length we have indicated, and often yea, generally too narrow to admit the body of a man of ordinary size, with flesh upon his bones. The grave would be "too short, that he could stretch himself in it, and too narrow, that he could wrap himself in it," nor deep enough to "bury the dead out of sight."

Reiterating at great length his earlier argument that the stone graves contained the bundled remains of secondary burials, he concluded:

Should Dr. (or Colonel) Hamlin and myself jump to the conclusion, that we had been wonderfully fortunate in discovering the most extraordinary man of the fabulous past, the man with three legs, or, because we found three tibias, or thigh bones of a full grown man in one short and narrow vault, that we might hope to find another and another, and so announce to the living men, old men and young gentlemen who flourish rattans or stay their steps with wooden sticks: "Ye are but poor representatives of the three legged men of olden times in Tennessee!"

Or, because in more than one instance, we found the thigh bone by the side of the arm bone or shoulder-blade, shall it be concluded that here was a lusus naturae, a human prodigy, a man with legs and arms joined to his body at the one scapula on each side? That because I found one head in the midst of the ribs, shall any one say, this was a gourmand. Grace a Dieu. Il a son tete dans son ventre! Il si devors lui meme! Il a commence bien! Good! This sort swallow their own heads – real unmistakable anthropophagi! A Terrapin, Man Monster!...

The revival of [the pigmy graveyard story] *now, is doubtless, as in former instances, the hasty inference from "surface indication," and a disregard of the rules of science – the science of physiology and anatomy.*

We sincerely hope that Gen. Milroy and other gentlemen who are more or less influenced by "surface indications" and small drippings in their explorations for petroleum, may not be mistaken or disappointed, and we are of the number having faith in the existence of rock-oil, and in many places, too, in Middle Tennessee. I would insure discovery of petroleum, but not of giants or pigmy men (except the political).

The fact that the original was published in *The Nashville Union*, but the response in *The Nashville Dispatch* is probably not coincidental: "The *Union*'s motto reflected its pro-Union stance: 'For Freedom and Nationality.' This steadfast viewpoint brought the paper into conflict with the politically devoid *Nashville Dispatch*" (Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Electronic document accessed 23 Jun 2013; http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025718/). Not for the first or last time, politics became intertwined with discussions of the Tennessee pygmies. In this instance, the Tennessee pygmies were enlisted as tools in Reconstruction era conflicts. On January 2, 1866, Putnam presented "the greater part of a human skull, and a shell medallion... obtained from one of the so-called pygmy graves of an ancient aboriginal cemetery near the mouth of Stone River, Davidson County, Tenn" to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (*Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* 1866, No. 1, pg 1.).

In a subsequent letter (31 Aug 1866) to Professor George Gibbs, geologist and ethnologist with the Smithsonian Institution, Milroy backtracked on his position on the pygmies:

The account you speak of seeing in a newspaper of my finding "a quantity of skulls of dwarf size" in the neighborhood of Nashville appeared without my authorization, and was not all true. The facts were as follows, I had heard frequently that at two or three points in Middle Tenn. collections of pigmy graves had been discovered that were believed by the

> *people of the neighborhood to be human graves. Happening to pass one of these points in Wilson County and being curious to see these graves and know whether they were human or not. I stopped and made an examination. I found a collection of about a dozen small rude stone boxes in an old field in the valley of a small stream that had been laid bare by the washing of high waters. The boxes had apparently been constructed by digging small oblong square holes in the ground and placing flat thin undressed stones at the bottom, sides, ends and over the top. The inside of these boxes were from 10 inches to a foot in diameter and from 14 inches to 2 ft. long averaging about 18 inches. Numerous small bones much decayed were found inside these boxes. Fragments of ribs, vertibra, leg bones, and occipital plate of a small skull -- but all so much decayed that it was very difficult to determine what they belonged to whether human or arnimal. Not being an anatomist I brought most of the fragments I could find to Nashville and submitted them to Dr. [August] Gatlinger, the state Librarian, who is a gentleman of some science. He was at first inclined to the opinion that they were human bones, but after a full examination came to the conclusion that they were dog bones. Some newspaper reporters who were present when I first submitted these bones to Dr. Gatlinger got up the story you saw in the papers* (MS 1205, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution).

These stories were to inspire Joseph Jones, one of the nation's emerging medical scholars, to address the question of pygmies at great length in the first major treatise to be published on the antiquities of Tennessee. During his 1867-1868 excavations in the Nashville area, Joseph Jones expended considerable effort gathering evidence to dispel the story once and for all. In addition to his own explorations in and about Nashville, Jones asked a medical colleague, Dr. James Snodgrass of Sparta, to send him bones from the small graves. After receiving a significant number of human remains and examining them thoroughly he concluded that:

> [Haywood's] *account of the pigmies of Tennessee is an example of how a wild hypothesis may, from the love of the marvelous, be founded upon a few hasty and imperfect observations… I carefully examined the bones from the small graves near Sparta… and found them to be the remains of infants and children during the period of dentition... I have never discovered a single skeleton of an adult of unusually small stature... in every case, the small graves contained either the skeletons of children or the bones of full-grown adults, which had been deposited in the square stone coffins, after they had been separated from the flesh and disjointed... the existence of a race of pigmies in Tennessee in ancient times is a mere figment of the imagination* (Jones 1876:11-13).

Jones' conclusions were first presented at a public lecture held as a fundraiser for the Confederate Orphan Asylum on 20 Oct 1868 -- at which he was introduced by A.W. Putnam. Jones' vehement dismissal of the pygmy theory has been cited as evidence of his early scientific approach to archaeological research. In a broader context, some of Jones' vigor may well reflect his own involvement in Reconstruction era politics. That same year, however, Edward J. Wood (1868:246) would continue to publicize the White County Pygmies in *Giants and Dwarfs*, a work of juvenile nonfiction printed in England.

The Smithsonian Expeditions of 1875

With the United States Centennial celebration approaching in 1876, the widespread stories of Tennessee pygmies apparently began to concern the leadership of the Smithsonian Institution. In conjunction with the Centennial, Philadelphia was to host the first major world's fair and exposition in the United States. Intermingled with the host of stories about the nature and origins of the

"Ancient Moundbuilder Race," the pygmies became a centerpiece of Smithsonian interests in Tennessee. In 1874, Joseph Henry, first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote to a number of Tennessee citizens seeking their assistance in examining the pygmy graveyard stories.

During May 1875, Dr. William Martin Clark explored a series of cemeteries and mounds near his home in Franklin, Tennessee with a $50.00 grant from the Smithsonian. During the first week of October 1875, Professor Henry also commissioned three Nashville men to visit Sparta "to procure specimens of the skeletons of this departed race for exhibition in the collection at Washington... on Thursday, the 7th, beside of the grave out of which Haywood obtained a skeleton during his researches, were secured the bones of a pigmy" (*The Columbian*, 7 Jan 1876; Lillard 1884:28). At the same time, Henry received the first draft of Joseph Jones' monograph concerning his 1867-1868 explorations in Middle Tennessee with lengthy sections denouncing the Tennessee pygmy story. Henry agreed to fund the 1876 publication of a heavily edited version of Jones' monograph (in conjunction with the US Centennial) as part of the federal dismissal of the Tennessee Pygmy story. After detailed examination of the remains by Dr. George Otis and others at the Army Medical Museum and Smithsonian, Henry issued what we would today call a press release on January 4, 1876, titled "The Tennessee Pygmies:"

> *Since quite an early period of the history of the United States, reports of the former existence of a race of pygmies in different parts of the country have prevailed and been periodically revived. A recent revival of the tradition has given rise to much speculation and a number of dogmatic statements, and reports of the existence of a pygmy race in Tennessee have been reprinted from American papers into European.*
>
> *The Smithsonian institution has recently taken means to ascertain what foundation there might be for the current statements. For this purpose it dispatched a young man to a portion of the State of Tennessee where recent diggings have unearthed the remains which have given origin anew to the recent reports... The former existence of the pygmies, or "Little Folks," as they are called, is firmly believed in that place. Within the last ten years it was reported that at least three hundred bodies have been ploughed up in the county. Notwithstanding this fact, however, the agent sent for the purpose procured very few skeletal remains, all collected not filling more than a small box. The fragments thus sent proved on examination in no way abnormal, and corresponded with, and were evidently the remains of two young children between three and four years old.*
>
> *There were three petrous bones with parts of the mastoid and squamous portions, tolerably well preserved, fragments of the occipitals, frontals, and sphenoids, four parietals, and the upper and lower maxillaries of both skeletons nearly entire, and with nearly all the deciduous and rudimentary permanent teeth either in place or scattered among the fragments. There were also numerous fragments of vertebrae, ribs, and long and flat bones. The teeth, on comparison by Dr. Otis, of the Army Medical Museum, corresponded very well with children of 42 and 45 months old. The long bones of the upper and lower extremities also indicated a corresponding age. There was in fact nothing to suggest arrested or abnormal development. With the human remains forwarded were two incisor teeth of the beaver, the costal fragments of a turtle, some wrought pottery, and broken valves of unions. These suggest the ordinary Indian sepulcher.*
>
> *... There can, however, be no doubt that the belief in the existence of the pygmies has grown out of the consideration of the size of the graves rather than of their contents. These graves are quite uniform in size, and are each nearly two feet in length by about fourteen inches in width, and from twelve to sixteen in depth. The Smithsonian employee measured exactly the graves from which the remains sent to the Institution were taken, and found one to be 21 ½ inches long, 14 ½ wide, and 12 deep; and the other 22 inches in length, 14 ½ wide,*

and 12 ½ deep. These were covered by slabs. The rocks of which the graves are formed are sandstone, which is said not to be found in the bottom land, but to have been obtained from the tops of the mountains.

The graves generally are quite superficial, the covering slabs being often not more than four or five inches below the surface of the ground. Their presence, however, is not indicated at the surface, and the graves are only detected by excavation. The farmer not infrequently runs across them with his plough on newly cultivated land, and on account of their being an obstruction they have been mostly pulled down.

One of the earliest, if not the earliest notice of the existence of pygmy graves in Tennessee may be found in John Haywood's Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee, published at Nashville in 1823 (pp. 200-209, 360-361), and reference is made therein to the same place in which the recent excavations were made. "Certain small tombs, and skeletons in them," says Haywood, "having been discovered a few miles from Sparta, in the county of White, and a publication having been made concerning them in the Nashville Whig of June, 1820, Mr. Lane, from whom the information first came, was written to; all his feelings were alive, and all his exertions were roused." The result was that excavations were made and several skeletons found. The remains found were submitted to medical men at Nashville, and various opinions were entertained respecting the maturity or infancy of the small skeletons, but the prevailing opinion was, says the author, that the skeletons belonged to adult persons. This may have been the case with regard to the others, but there can be no question of the immaturity of the fragments sent to the Smithsonian Institution (*The Academy,* Volume 9, January 29, 1876, pg. 97).

Although the question was now answered to the satisfaction of the national and international scientific community, the myth of the Ancient Tennessee Pygmies would prove as resilient as that of the Ancient Race of Moundbuilders. Only a few weeks after this "final" statement, an even more astonishing discovery of a cemetery in Coffee County was announced in papers nationwide:

an ancient graveyard of vast proportions has been found in Coffee county... and shows that the race of pigmies who once inhabited this country were very numerous... The bones show they were a dwarf tribe of people, about three feet high. It is estimated that there were about 75,000 to 100,000 buried there (*Daily American,* 14 Mar 1876; originally published in *Woodbury Press*).

This stimulated an editorial in the *Gallatin* (Tennessee) *Examiner* of 18 Mar 1876 that adds yet another county to the Land of the Pygmies:

Pigmy Remains in Sumner County... We remember, many years ago, to have made excavations in the yard of Col. Alfred R. Wynne, of Castalian Springs in this county, and we found the remains of a similar race of people. The bones indicated human beings not much above three feet in height. The most singular circumstance was their burial in layers, one above another. The graves were formed of stone slabs, at the side, end and bottom, and covered in the same manner. After taking out the upper body, we found a second and third grave exactly underneath. The bones did not disintegrate as is usually the case, where found in the earth, as we kept the skeleton for a year or two in our office... These graves are in a few hundred yards of the famous Mound in the Spring lot which was opened by the artist Earle, a great many years ago...

Nonetheless, the widespread publication of the Smithsonian conclusions in early 1876 did have an impact. Perhaps in response to the Coffee County pygmies article, in March 1876, W.L. Alden, the noted humorist, published a lengthy column in the *New York Times* about the Tennessee pygmies:

TENNESSEE'S PYGMIES

Prehistoric America must have been an exceedingly curious and interesting country. Its forests were filled with mastodons, megatheriums, and other large and lively beasts, any one of which thought nothing of

scratching himself on the sharp pinnacles of a convenient Gothic church, and so toppling it over on its scores of helpless pew-holders. In the Mississippi Valley, the industrious mound-builders were constantly throwing up gigantic mole-hills, and planting them with earthen pots and copper hatchets, in the vain expectation that the seed thus sown would yield enormous crops of kitchen-ware and carpenter's tools. In Kentucky, the giants to whom the bones recently discovered in a Kentucky cave are said to have belonged, strode loftily along the turnpikes, kicking the Indians and the mound-builders contemptuously out of the way; and finally, in Tennessee, a race of pygmies was continually holding political meetings and resolving that mastodons, mound-builders, and giants should be promptly abolished, and that the size of the inhabitants of this country should be made and kept commensurate with its commercial necessities.

It is rather odd that the existence of the Tennessee pygmies of prehistoric America was until recently never suspected. The name of the mastodon has long been familiar to every person who is in the least degree addicted to fossils. His remains, in the shape of a plaster-of-Paris skeleton, with the artist's name stamped on the forehead, are exhibited in every respectable museum, and inspire the youth of America with bitter regret that an animal so beautifully adapted for experiments with red-pepper lozenges has gone where the small boy ceases to trouble and the nomadic circus is at rest. The mound-builders have been the subject of scores of learned essays, in which their identity with the Aztecs, the Chinese, the Egyptians, the Welsh, and the lost tribes of Israel has been triumphantly shown; and of the exact height and probable capacity for whiskey of the Kentucky giants, we have had careful and presumably accurate statistics. The discovery of the pygmies is, however, so very recent, that no one has as yet framed any theory whatever to account for their origin, and to explain their complete extinction.

When the Kentucky giants were discovered it was natural that the State pride of the people of Tennessee should be somewhat hurt. The Tennesseans, however, did not sit down and content themselves with reviling the Kentuckians and insinuating doubts as to the alleged character of the gigantic bones. They promptly proceeded to find rival bones of still greater merit, and their industry has been rewarded by the discovery of a grave yard containing the skeletons of seventy-five thousand pygmies of the average height of three feet each. What are the three nine-foot giants of Kentucky, in comparison with so great a cloud of pygmies? If we may judge from the price usually paid by circus manager for living giants and dwarfs a three-foot dwarf is decidedly more valuable than a nine-foot giant, and if the same standard governs the price of fossils, the seventy-five thousand Tennessee pigmies are worth fully twenty-five thousand times as much as the three Kentucky giants. While the Kentuckians can present their giants to three eminent scientific men, and thus obtain three distinct scientific reports certifying to the enormous interest and value of fossil giants, the Tennesseans can supply every scientific man in this country and in Europe with a fossil dwarf, and so secure testimonials without number to the unequally excellence of Tennessee pygmies. Indeed, if the discoverers of the pygmies will only employ some astute piano-maker who is an expert in testimonials, to obtain for the fossil dwarfs the recognition of the scientific world, there is not a living scientific person who will not sign a certificate setting forth his admiration for the beauty and durability of the pygmies, and his determination to use none but those of the celebrated Tennessee grave-yard for the rest of his professional life.

At what period these pygmies flourished, what they accomplished, and by what means they were induced to retire simultaneously to the graveyard, can only be conjectured. They may have been the identical pygmies that, according to the Greek legend, waged war with the cranes. If so, the cranes must have proved too powerful for them. This is hardly probable, and any modern Tennessean who has attempted to keep chickens in the neighborhood of a family of citizens of African descent, will scornfully refuse to believe that pygmies of three feet in height could not kill cranes on their roost with at least as much success as is achieved by the African small boy when invading the midnight hen-house. We must wait for further discoveries before it will be safe to decide whether the pygmies were contemporary with the giants and whether they preceded the mound-builders. The bare fact that they once existed is all that we can now safely affirm of them; but doubtless by the time that every home in the country is ornamented with a fossil pygmy, and every newspaper publishes extracts from the certificates of

> *scientific persons who are overwhelmed with admiration of the vast superiority of the Tennessee pygmies to those of all rival communities, we shall be in the possession of information which will enable us to know at least as much of the pygmies as we now know of the mastodon and the mound-builders* (Alden 1876).

The emphatic statement of the Smithsonian concerning the demise of the Tennessee pygmy myth had also elevated them and their believers to the overt realm of national humor. Another effort to dispel the stories was published by Otis Mason, American ethnologist and curator at the Smithsonian Institution in the December 1876 issue of *Harper's*:

> *The frequent allusions in the daily newspapers to pygmy graves in Tennessee revive an old story set on foot, or at least confirmed, by John Haywood in his Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee, written fifty-three years ago. This fanciful notion, although now and formerly commonly entertained by the people of that State, has been thoroughly exploded by the labors of Troost, Putnam, Clark, Haskins, and others, but especially by the explorations of Dr. Joseph Jones, who "examined the bones from fifteen aboriginal cemeteries without discovering a single skeleton of an adult of unusually small stature." While giving a death-blow to this myth, these gentlemen have disclosed other facts of more thrilling interest, which proves that in Tennessee are to be found the evidences of the most advanced civilization which obtained in the Mississippi Valley* (Mason 1876:43).

Despite this widespread distribution in a popular magazine, the pygmies continued to prove resilient. In 1883, a correspondent described his 1839 explorations of "A Buried City of Lilliputians in the Cumberland Mountains:"

> *In the summer of 1839 I spent some two or three weeks on the Cumberland mountains in Middle Tennessee. I had been engaged in teaching, and was in need of rest, and taking a good horse rode up to the Chalybeate Springs, in White County, some twelve miles from Sparta, the county seat.... We heard from our host that there was a buried city of Lilliputians some five miles distant through the mountain passes, and a company of five gentlemen, with a colored man for a guide, started out to make an investigation... The farm was owned by Thomas Wilson, a good Scotch name, and I have no doubt a man of truth... The walls of the city were in the form of an octagon, or nearly so, and enclosed about six or eight acres. They were about three feet high, made of earth and loose stones thrown up...Running through the center of the town were two rows of houses, on each side of a street. These were mere circles of earth, only a foot or eighteen inches high, and about twelve feet in diameter. Near the center were two such circles, about thirty feet in diameter, which had probably been their council houses. These could be distinctly traced, although evidently greatly reduced by time.*
>
> *But the strangest part of the story is yet to be told. Mr. Wilson told us that on the highest part of this enclosure many graves had been opened, and skeletons found... the plow struck a flat stone, and on turning it up there was found a human skeleton, of a very diminutive size. He said that about a hundred had been exhumed up to that time. They were all buried in a sitting posture, with the knees drawn up near the chin, and the hands clasped on the top of the head. A flat stone was at the bottom and on the four sides and on top. By taking an iron crow-bar, and striking it down in the mellow soil, we soon found a grave. We opened two that afternoon... The bones were well preserved, and we got out the entire skeleton, even to the bones of the fingers and toes.... And now the most curious of all is to be told. The bones of the thigh and of the arm were not quite half the length of an ordinary man; so that they could not have been more than two and a half or three feet in height. They were not the bones of children, for they were hard, and children's bones of that size would have perished in a few years, being almost wholly cartilage. Beside, they had the wisdom teeth, which proved that they were adults. Then, all the graves which had been opened contained these small skeletons; not one exception. There could not have been so many infants buried in one place... Why did I not write out some account of this wonderful discovery at the time? Simply because I thought it would be regarded as a hoax* (*Daily American,* 9 Aug

1883, pg. 6; apparently originally published in the *New York Observer).*

Perhaps in response to *New York Observer* article, one of the explorers hired by Spencer Baird of the Smithsonian published a detailed memoir of his 1875 observations. In 1884, Dr. John B. Lillard, having relocated from Tennessee to New York, published "The Small Stone Graves of White County, Tennessee" in the *Proceedings of the Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York*. Therein, he reveals the unfortunate devastation visited upon these ancient cemeteries by agricultural practices: "upon inquiry I learned that most of them, if not all in this locality, have been plowed up... I was told that as the top rock of these little graves or vaults dulled and broke the plow points, the farmers have in plowing taken out the rocks and plowed up the graves indiscriminately, thus forever destroying one of the richest fields for archaeologists. In the locality just mentioned, over three hundred have been lost, and perhaps among these some of the finest specimens... " (Lillard 1884:28).

Lillard also documents another source of damage and destruction that can be more directly attributed to the Tennessee Pygmy story. On another nearby farm he notes "we opened six in the field, all of which had been opened previously, but could find nothing worth preserving" (Lillard 1884:28; emphasis added). On yet another farm, he "examined nearly thirty graves, all of which had been previously opened" (Lillard 1884:28; emphasis added). Hence, even by the time of his explorations in 1875, the macabre interest in finding pygmy skeletons had devastated the region's archaeological record.

Third Wave: Tennessee Pygmies in the Literary Tradition (1890s)

The next wave of interest in the Tennessee Pygmies took a wholly different turn with their entry into the realm of literature -- reaching an even wider audience than before. Mary Noailles Murfree (1850-1922), writing under the pseudonym of Charles Egbert Craddock, was one of Tennessee's earliest prominent female novelists (Loyd 1970). In her 1891 novel *In the Stranger People's Country*, Murfree incorporates the Tennessee pygmies as the central plotline around which she weaves the culture of the upper Cumberland region of Tennessee. Her story relates the contacts between the people of an Upper Cumberland mountain community and an amateur archaeologist in search of some pygmy graves to examine. Based in part on the multitude of real visits by "outsiders" in search of pygmies to these communities, numerous characters introduce the reader to these interactions that by 1891 had spanned nearly four generations. Shattuck, the "archaeologist," encounters resistance from Adelaide Yates, who threatens to shoot anyone seeking to disturb the rest of the "leetle stranger people." With prophetic vision, Adelaide noted that "they will all rise before we-uns at the jedgmint-day" (Craddock 1891:8). Her husband "was a hardy hunter, of a vigorous physique and but scantily acquainted with fear, but this eerie idea of a thousand or so adult pygmy Tennesseans astir on the last day, forestalling the familiar mountain neighbors, robbed immortality for the moment of its wonted prestige" (Craddock 1891:9). In striking disrespect for the desires of local people to respect the sleep of the dead, Shattuck vigorously prosecuted his search for a pygmy grave:

> *'I only want to see what this widespread story of prehistoric pigmy dwellers in Tennessee rests upon. That is all. I think they must be children - these Little People...' The opportunity of investigating this most unique myth, originating how and where no man can tell, of which so much has been so diversely written and said, caused every sentiment of the archaeologist to glow within him. In this secluded region it was hardly probable that the tread of science had ever before pressed the turf of the pygmy burying-ground... Every detail was full of interest; the very method of coffining -- the six slabs of stone in the shallow graves, the strange weavings and material of the shrouding rugs and mats, the ornaments, the weapons, the jugs with the sea-shells within -- what rich intimations of the industrial status, the civilization of these people of the pygmy myth!* (Craddock 1891:212).

Recently, a resurgence of interest in Murfree's writing prompted reprinting of several of her twenty-five novels, including this one (2005, University of Nebraska Press). Marjorie Pryse (2000:199) describes this region of Appalachia as a "contact zone" or social space within which disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination (Pratt 1992), Pryse describes this work as "her most complex intervention into the outsider-insider binary that characterizes the regionalist's approach to the mountaineers" and

> *as her attempt to intervene into that binary in various ways, including considering evidence of early Indian tribes that predated the Cherokee, exploring conflict between science and legend concerning who has control over the remains of these Indians, representing tensions in Appalachian politics that emerged with the arrival of outsiders into the region... It is precisely Murfree's interest in the prehistoric people who lie buried in her novel that expresses her larger interest in the process of exploring contact. Here interest in archaeology characterizes the encounter between science and legend as itself a contact zone for exploring competing claims to the authority over the interpretation of Appalachia* (Pryse 2000:199-200).

In a footnote to a later work, *The Story of Old Fort Loudon*, Murfree concludes that "the painfully prosaic hypothesis of certain craniologists that such relics were only those of children is, of course, rejected by any person possessed of the resources of imagination" (Craddock 1899:403-404). Elsewhere, Murfree (Craddock 1917:331) continued to defend the beliefs of the local people against the conclusions of scientists:

> *they did make an important discovery by unearthing the prehistoric graves of the so-called pygmy dwellers of Tennessee. The graves, which are only about two feet deep, are constructed of stone slabs and contain the bones of what was apparently a pygmy race. A noted craniologist, Dr. Morton, declared that one of the skulls was that of a child, but why scores of children only should be buried in a cemetery is hard to say. Other craniologists argued that the wisdom teeth proved that the skeletons were those of adult pygmies. Be that as it may, the relics seem an unsolved riddle of the ages.*

At about the same time, the Cumberland Mountains emerged as a popular resort area and numerous writers and painters spent time there. For example, Margaret Bloodgood Peeke (1838-1908) garnered notoriety through her letters about her favorite summer resort in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. While raised as a Protestant, she later converted to Martinism, a form of mystical Christianity, eventually becoming Inspectress General in America of the Martinist Order. Her later writing was devoted to an examination of the pygmies of America and the origin of this primordial race. Published under the title *Born of Flame* in 1892, the story was set in

Tennessee and intermingles the story of the pygmy people with the mystic faith of Rosicrucianism:

> *we have crossed oceans and seas to accomplish a purpose... that if we fail in this our journey will be fruitless, you will see how anxious we are to find the objects of our search, which, in a word, is neither more nor less than a skeleton of the pygmy race said to have existed here long ago... There have been at different times a number of graves of little people found at Doyle, about seven miles distant* (Peeke 1892:216-217).

Chapter XIV - "The Pygmy Hunt" - recounts the successful search for the physical remains of this primordial race of beings. Peeke explicitly lays out the spiritual and physical evolution of modern humans from the pygmies:

> *These little creatures, who once lived here where now we sit, were the progenitors of the Adamic man. Amid the throes of nature, in this region, the land was hurled asunder, but the continent was not destroyed. The climate shielded well the race who lived and died here, and no one dare compute the ages that have passed since then. It was decreed that some remains should be preserved against the time when proof was needed of the truth, and hence, to-day, I carry with me fragments of their dead, and after this not one shall ever be found.*
>
> *But Adam began the race by the Euphrates, and these were never there.*
>
> *When the Mound-Builders of larger stature drove these little people hence, they fled across to Asia... they moved through India and on to the Euphrates. Here it was that light from spirit source first burned in human breast. Here man became Adamio - son of God - a living, never-dying creature* (Peeke 1892: 262-263).

Like numerous mystical movements of the time, Peeke merged the spiritual evolution of humanity with the scientific jargon of biological evolution -- leaving us with a story of the initial Creation of an imperfect pygmy race that evolved to become the perfect "Adamic man."

Emma Lampert Cooper (1855-1920) was one of the most renowned painters of Rochester, New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her 1893 experiences in the region were recounted in the *Post Express* (20 Oct 1893) in an article titled "Digging Pygmies: Miss Emma Lampert's Experiences in the Mountains of Tennessee:"

> *Finding the Pygmy Graves. A Race of People Hardly Known to Science and Antedating the Mound Builders -- They were Seldom Over Twenty Inches High. Miss Emma E. Lampert has returned to her studio and has resumed her classes... she.. was away all the summer... She was telling a POST EXPRESS reporter of her adventures the other afternoon and casually asked if he had ever heard of the race of pygmies which once inhabited the mountainous districts of Tennessee and North Carolina. "Scarcely anyone has," said she, "and almost everyone I tell about it seems to think that I must be slightly unbalanced.... My newly aroused interest in ethnology... commenced at the Fair [1893 Chicago World's Fair]... After leaving the Fair I went with a party of twelve to the mountains of Tennessee and passed a delightful month there. While sketching in that vicinity I heard for the first time in my life that some of the farms in these mountains are honeycombed with little graves of a race of people who must have antedated the mound builders and the cliff dwellers and all the peoples of antiquarian interest in North America. The peculiar part of it seems to be that science has as yet paid so little attention to them... Finally our patience was rewarded. On turning over a large flat rock a cavity was revealed half filled with dirt. On scraping this out we found that the pigmy grave was formed of flat rocks at the ends and sides. The grave was twenty-two inches long and thirty wide. It was evidently a double grave, and one of the largest ever found in that vicinity. From the position of the crumbled bit of bone found beneath the dirt it was evident that two little bodies had lain there side by side through the ages... the bits of bone were too much decomposed to give a very satisfactory indication of the size of the buried pigmies, but they cannot have been larger than the grave they inhabited... I do not think the scientists have as yet paid much attention to them. I am*

going to have a talk with some of the Ward natural science establishment curators about the matter."

Alongside the flood of mining companies entering the region in the late nineteenth century came a parallel stream of tourists from throughout the eastern United States -- many of whom carried the stories of Tennessee pygmies away with them as souvenirs of their visits. In 1904, the *Nashville American* (4 Aug 1904) once again proved that folklore was stronger than science:

Graves of Midgets: Tombs of a Prehistoric Race Found in White County. Mystery Surrounds the Remains Found in these Diminutive Sarcophagi. Much Fiction has been Written About Them, but the Puzzle is Unsolved. Considerable interest has recently been aroused in what is known as the "Little People" [of Sparta].... As to the date when these little people existed there seems to be no evidence, but it was doubtless long before the Indians settled this section.... It is probable that there are other graves of these "Little People" undiscovered in this immediate vicinity, as no special effort has ever been made to find them.

In 1905, Henry Henshaw (1905:111-112) published his "top fourteen list" of popular fallacies respecting the American Indians. Prominent amongst them were stories of Native American pygmies and giants:

All times and all peoples have had traditions of pygmies... It is therefore nowise surprising that such myths were early transplanted to American soil. The story of an ancient race of pygmies in Tennessee, familiar to most archaeologists, owes its origin to the discovery, in the early half of the last century, of numerous small stone coffins, or cists, containing skeletons. The largest, measured by Featherstonhaugh, was 24 inches long by 9 inches deep. The small size of the cists was assumed by their discoverers to be proof of the existence of a race of dwarfs, and the belief gained ready credence and exists to the present day in the minds of a few. In many cases the skeletons of the supposed dwarfs proved to be those of children, while, as pointed out by Jones and Thomas, the skeletons of the adults found in the cists had been deprived of flesh, a common Indian mortuary custom, and then disjointed, when the bones of an adult could be packed into a very small space.

A race of dwarfs has also been popularly ascribed to the cliff-dweller region of New Mexico and Arizona, partly owing to the finding of shriveled and shrunken mummies of children, too hastily assumed to be those of dwarfs, and partly owing to the discovery of small apartments in the cliff dwellings, of the nature of cubbyholes for the storage of property, the entrances to which were too small to permit the passage, erect, of an ordinary man; hence in the mind of the discoverers, they must have been used by dwarfs. The Pueblo peoples are, indeed, of relatively small stature, but they are as far from being dwarfs as other Indians from being giants. (Henshaw 1905; pp. 111-112).

The Reverend Doctor Monroe Seals, first pastor of the First Presbyterian Church at Cookeville in Putnam County and local historian, also explored the Tennessee pygmies, as recounted in the *Nashville American* (12 May 1907):

Traces of a Pigmy Race in Tennessee. Cookeville. Dr. M. Seals, a well-known scientist, who has spent much of his life studying the ancient history of mankind, the various forms of life, and the descent of humanity...is strongly of the opinion that years ago a race of dwarfs inhabited the North American Continent. This fact is strongly substantiated by evidences of their existence that have been found in White County, near Bon Air, and it is also said that a number of graves have lately been discovered in Overton County. Dr. Seals said: "I have spent much time investigating the theory whether there existed a pigmy race in America, that lived somewhere in the dim past and left a trace to puzzle moderners, and am convinced beyond a doubt that long ages ago a race of men much smaller than is commonly supposed did exist.... It has been frequently argued that the smaller graves contained bodies of adolescents who had been buried with their parents when killed,

> *but this cannot be true. The enamel on the teeth are perfect, the bones are not cartilaginous and they scarcely exceed a height of more than two and a half or three feet....Most of the tombs in White County have been broken into by curiosity-seekers, and just now only one place, to my knowledge, is complete in its original form."*

In 1935, Reverend Seals published a *History of White County, Tennessee* in which he concluded: "In addition, at many places in the County there are small graves. These small graves are supposed by some to have been made by a pigmy race which inhabited this region before the coming of the Cherokees. There has been much argument among ethnologists on this point. Some of them contend that these graves are only the graves of children. Others contend that they are the graves of a long-forgotten race. Many of the skulls found in these graves have a full set of adult teeth, which lends some color to the claim that they were pigmies." With over a century in print, the Tennessee Pygmies continued to successfully defy the challenge of science.

The New Wave: Tennessee Pygmies Reborn (1980-)

Although the pygmies never quite disappeared from public interest, they remained largely in the realm of local folklore through the middle of the twentieth century -- until 1980, when Barry Fell, Harvard marine biologist turned epigrapher, raised them from quiescence once again. Fell acquired a following after his retirement with publication of three books *America B.C.* (1976), *Saga America* (1982), and *Bronze Age America* (1983) in which he rewrote the history of North America to include ancient transatlantic voyages by Europeans, Africans and Asians to the Americas. Marc Stengel (2000) noted that "to the academic establishment, however, Fell was a self-promoting pseudo-scientist who threatened to undo more than a century of careful progress in archaeological and anthropological research... Both before and after Fell's death, in 1994, his critics were merciless, citing a variety of errors of chronology and interpretation and also Fell's perceived distaste for peer review by specialists." Stephen WIlliams (1986) addressed Fell's arguments:

> *However, I must then add a sad last note: the pygmies are back in Tennessee. Prof. Barry Fell, emeritus professor of Marine Biology from Harvard, has found them all over again. Apparently little knowing or caring about Joseph Jones versus John Haywood, and the fact that the matter was settled to most people's satisfaction over one hundred years ago, Prof. Fell, in Bronze Age America has published that there are skeletons of pygmies from East Tennessee, and they date to the third century B.C... It should not surprise us that with some of these skeletons are "readable inscriptions in an ancient European language". Apparently both Celtic and Basque words and phrases have been found. Mercifully, Prof. Fell has apparently not seen Thruston's inscribed stone or we would have a translation of it as well. So my reluctant conclusion is: all that is old is not bad, and all that is new is not good.*

Williams further noted in his book *Fantastic Archaeology* (1990:273):

> *He also revives, for reasons I cannot fathom, the notion that there was a race of pygmies in Tennessee in late prehistoric times. Indeed, Fell's picture adorns the back cover of his latest volume with calipers in hand and a pygmy (so-called) skull lying on his garden table; obviously, physical anthropology is just another arcane specialty he has brought to fruition in retirement.*

Most recently, creation of the Internet and the unprecedented opportunity it provides for virtually anyone to self publish has

prompted even more widespread dissemination of knowledge about the ancient Tennessee pygmies -- now most frequently examined as part of a global primordial "race of pygmies" that antedate modern humans. For examples, as reported by Peter Marsh (2004):

> *Skeletons of these people have been found in Tennessee, Brazil, Tierra del Fuego, and Tasmania, indicating they constituted a major pan global population that was crushed by a major natural catastrophe 75,000 years ago... Survivors of this world population of Pygmies can still be found in the Congo, Andaman Islands, Philippines, New Guinea Highlands, and some aborigines of North Queensland.... It is interesting to note that these pygmies all appear to have the bow and arrow as a hallmark of their culture. It is quite likely they had this technology 100,000 years ago.*

The widely publicized discovery of the fossil remains of so-called "Hobbits" (*Homo floresiensis*) on the Indonesian island of Flores prompted a resurgence of speculation about the relationship of the Ancient Tennessee Pygmies to these mysterious diminutive hominids. Many other examples can be found with a simple Internet search on "Tennessee pygmies." Having brought the Tennessee Pygmies into the 21st century, I conclude with an examination of the reasons behind this nearly two centuries of recurrent interest.

Discussion

One of the earliest known published mentions of cemeteries filled with diminutive people comes from near the town of Fenton in southeast Missouri. In October 1818, Mr. Long discovered "a number of graves, the size of which appeared to be uncommonly small... which convinced him they were the remains of human beings much smaller than those of the present day" ("Antiquity: Dwarf Skeletons," *The Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser*, 12 Dec 1818). Whether the tales of the pygmies of Tennessee predate publication of this newspaper article remains unknown, but certainly they emerged shortly thereafter -- and soon came to eclipse all others in the Midwest and Southeast. Sporadic reports of pygmy discoveries in nearby states can be noted, but none of these regional reports exhibit anywhere near the magnitude and persistence of the Tennessee Pygmy legend. This raises the question of "why?" I suggest that the relatively unique convergence of several factors along the Cumberland River contributed to the success of the Tennessee pygmies.

For the purposes of interpreting the stories of Tennessee pygmies, I will distinguish three general categories: a) "dwarfs", or <u>individual</u> humans affected by a variety of genetic and environmental factors that prevent them from reaching full normal stature for their population; b) "pygmies, " <u>groups</u> of humans whose average stature is normally significantly less than the majority of human populations; and c) "Little People" (*aka* faeries, brownies, leprechauns, etc.), groups of supernatural creatures of human-like form but often described as having diminutive stature. The former two are "scientific" categories, while the latter fits more firmly into the stuff of legends.

First, let's dispense with the "science" before delving more deeply into legend. In the realm of science, two broad classes of humans can be said to exhibit diminutive stature – “dwarves” and “pygmies.” In general, the term “dwarf” has been applied to individuals affected by genetic and/or environmental factors that limit their potential to reach adult stature within the normal population range – and exhibit atypical bodily proportions. The most

common cause of dwarfism in humans is achondroplasia – a disorder of bone growth that can be inherited genetically but in most cases appears as a spontaneous mutation (U.S. National Library of Medicine 2011). Achondroplasia is classified as a rare disease with a modern incidence rate of 1 in 15,000 to 40,000 newborns. Only two cases are documented for the prehistoric Southeast – both from Moundville, Alabama (Snow 1943). Given the seemingly thousands of graves exhumed in search of pygmies, it seems statistically possible that one of these early explorers encountered the remains of a skeleton exhibiting achondroplasia. However, since dwarfism refers to extraordinarily rare individual cases, its existence in prehistoric North America is noted but is probably not relevant to the topic at hand -- cemeteries full of individuals of diminutive stature.

The history of the term “pygmies” is more directly relevant – although substantively merged with mythology and the western literary tradition during the Renaissance: “In 1699, the distinguished English anatomist Edward Tyson penned a withering rebuttal of this resurgent mythology, based on his careful surgical analysis of a ‘Pygmy’ from the Congo – in fact a juvenile chimpanzee, the skeleton of which is still on display at London’s Natural History Museum – and his equally meticulous dissection of the literary sources for the myth... For Tyson, the term Pygmy carried with it all of the fabulous connotations of the other staples of the mediaeval imaginary – the satyrs, cynocephali and sphinges (or sphinxes)” (Ballard 2006:136). Travelers sustained the Pygmy myth, however, through the nineteenth century (Bahuchet 1993). As suggested by Ballard (2006:141-142), the "Pygmy question" revolved around the debate over Pygmy origins. Eventually the corpus of collected travel stories were compiled to advance two competing "scientific" interpretations (even in the absence of any evidence): 1) the notion of a primordial global race of pygmies with the modern pygmies representing isolated remnant populations under pressure from later, larger humans; or 2) the different pygmy communities were simply degenerate forms of their larger neighbors and not directly related to one another. As Ballard (2001:141) asserts: "It is some measure of the power of Pygmy mythology that Pygmy primordiality came to be assumed and was held to be 'confirmed' and 'proved,' despite a complete absence of evidence." While beyond the scope of this article, there is clearly a synergistic interrelationship between the remains of the primordial Tennessee pygmies and the nineteenth and early twentieth century search for living examples. While no systematic study has been completed to date, the publication of traveler's stories of living pygmies reportedly encountered in the far reaches of the globe do correspond at least on occasion with resurgence of interest in the Tennessee pygmy graveyards (Frederick 1912; Haliburton 1897; Panhuys 1905; Starr 1896). As the preceding examples have illustrated, none of the remains examined by "scientists" over the past nearly two centuries were deemed to be those of pygmies. The influences of folklore on scientific questions thus becomes of significance.

Lore about individual humans or groups of humans of unusual stature -- pygmies and giants -- are common world-wide and have a particularly lengthy history in the western literary tradition. In the literary tradition, many stories about human-like creatures of diminutive stature are traced to Homer, who alludes to a battle between the Pygmies and the

Cranes (the *geranomachy*) in the third book of the *Iliad* -- a mythological story often captured visually on Greek vases (Scobie 1975). Less poetical mentions of races of diminutive humans are found in the classical accounts of Aristotle, Herodotus, Ctesias, Pliny the Elder, Pomponius Melo, and others. Without delving too deeply into the continuous history of this literary tradition, it is perhaps sufficient to cite the familiar Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians of Jonathan Swift's 1726 *Gulliver's Travels* (Figure 1), whose popularity was sufficient that their names entered relatively common usage in the English language with the meanings of "tiny" and "enormous," respectively (acknowledging that the Lilliputians more successfully penetrated the English language).

Outside of the literary tradition, some additional folk culture context for Tennessee is also warranted that might plays a role in interpreting the persistence of the Tennessee Pygmy legend. Many of the early settlers of the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee came from parts of Europe with strong folk traditions of "wee folk," including faeries, elves, dwarves, and brownies (Hand 1981). To this mix, we can also add some indigenous folklore of the eastern parts of what is now Tennessee -- particularly from the Cherokees. According to Witthoft and Hadlock (1975:413):

> *Various types of dwarfs are conspicuous personalities in American Indian pantheons. Often they closely resemble European folk figures and might be considered as a borrowing from European tradition. Such Little People are so widespread in America, however, and often so isolated from a suitable European tradition, that a foreign origin seems improbable as a general explanation for their existence.*

James Mooney described the Cherokee Little People as "a race of

FIGURE 1. Swift's "Lilliputians' (illustration by Milo Winter, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1912, Rand McNally New York).

spirits... who live in rock caves on the mountain side." He further indicated that they were generally "helpful and kindhearted" but "do not like to be disturbed." (Mooney 1900:333). The *yunwi tsundi*, or "little people," are among the most persistent traditions of the Cherokees, as evidenced by their consistent appearance in recent publications. In their collection of Cherokee stories, *Friends of Thunder*, recorded among the Oklahoma Cherokee in the early 1960s, Jack and Anna Kilpatrick (1964) devote a whole chapter to stories about the Little People, noting that "to the average Cherokee with some degree of traditional upbringing, the existence of Little People is an indisputable fact" (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick

1964). A similar pattern of persistence can be noted among the eastern Cherokee (King and Lossiah 2001; Prajznerova 2001). During a collection of oral histories, Jeannie Reed (1991:2) noted only three kinds of Little People that remained in the mountains: the Laurel People, the Rock People, and the Dogwood People. Although this contrasts with the multitude of spirits noted by Mooney, Reed further suggests that many of her informants believe that the other kinds of Little People left the mountains because of human intrusion into their territories (Reed 1991:2). A similar belief was expressed by Deskaheh, a Cayuga chief at the Six Nations Reserve who said that that since so much of the land had been cleared, "the Little People have withdrawn to the westward and are now rarely seen - although their presence is sometimes very real and they have not severed their connections with the Indian people" (Witthoft and Hadlock 1975:421-422). According to Kathi Smith Littlejohn, a Cherokee storyteller, "they look a lot like Indian people except they're only about two feet high, sometimes they're smaller... The Little people can be very helpful, and they can also play tricks on us, too" (quoted in Duncan 1998:68). Even though the Cherokee Little People are in many ways reminiscent of dwarves, leprechauns, and elves in European stories, anthropologists agree that the Little People's importance in the mythology of numerous other Native American cultures suggests pre-contact origins. Several of the cited sources suggest that these "little people" were perceived as distinct from the "Ancient Moundbuilder race." For example, Peeke (1892:262-263) suggests that the "Moundbuilder Race" drove the pygmies from their lands. Doran's consultants also drew a distinction concerning the Rock Woman as "probably one of the Mound Builders or one of the Little People" (Doran 1984:136). Although perceived as "civilized" since they built coffins of stone to inter the dead with their diminutive pots, these Little People were not clearly associated in the minds of believers with construction of the mounds, but rather preceded that "race" in an even more distant primordial time. This distinction may well have emerged alongside increasing assertions during the late nineteenth century that the Moundbuilders were the ancestors of historic Native Americans. Rather than ennobling the "savages" of Euroamerican contact with a grand past, the end result was to "en-savage" the Moundbuilders -- leading to the creation of a mythology of an even more ancient peaceful and civilized race of non-Indians. The assertion of savagery for the Moundbuilders was not a tremendous step in the context of the times -- they had long been associated as somehow related to the Aztecs and Toltecs -- the "Civilized Savages" of the far south. With that distinction in mind, I suggest that when the two powerful mythic traditions of Little People encountered one another in the Upper Cumberland, they may well have merged to become the deeply rooted story of Tennessee pygmies during the nineteenth century.

A second factor almost certainly contributed to the emergence and persistence of the Upper Cumberland Tennessee pygmies -- the reality of the pygmy graves. While the stone coffins of the Upper Cumberland may not have held the remains of diminutive people, the existence of diminutive graves has never been the point in dispute. In light of the last several decades of modern archaeological research in Middle Tennessee, these mysterious Pygmy

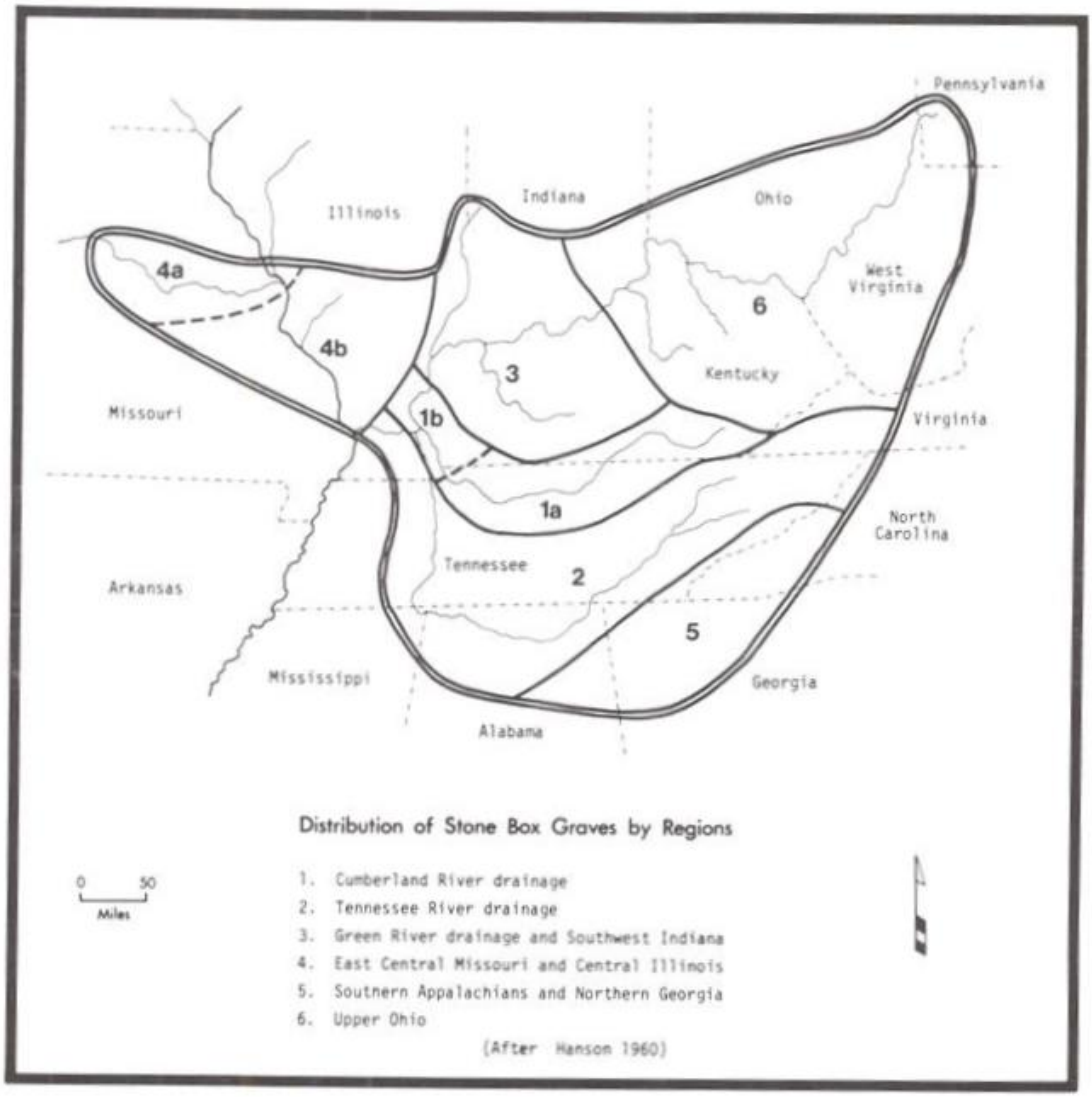

FIGURE 2. Distribution of stone-lined graves (Brown 1981, Figure 2).

Graves represent perhaps several different types of prehistoric Native American burial practice -- most related to the period between A.D. 1150 and 1450 in the region. Although mortuary features involving the extensive use of stone date back at least to the Woodland era in the interior south, the practice of constructing individual stone-lined graves reaches its most common and widespread form in Middle Tennessee between A.D. 1150 and 1450. While minority percentages of stone-lined graves are noted in a broad portion of the midwest and interior southeastern United States, the core area for their nearly exclusive use lies in sites within the drainage of the Cumberland River (Figure 2, region 1). Ian Brown (1981:8) noted that "overall, it is quite clear that a considerable portion of Nashville was built over an incredibly immense stone grave cemetery." Modern archaeology has identified small square-to-rectangular stone-lined graves in a variety of forms and settings in the region (Dowd 2008). The most common type of diminutive stone-lined grave is that of children. During at least part of the late

prehistoric era in Middle Tennessee, it was common practice to inter some infants and small children (up to one or two years of age) beneath the floors of residential structures, with the remainder of individuals buried in larger village or town cemeteries at some distance from houses (Figure 3).

While the meaning of this cultural practice remains uncertain, it does create the potential for misinterpretation of the scattered stone graves beneath houses as cemeteries containing only diminutive graves. A less common but well documented alternative form includes graves in which adult individuals are buried in a flexed position (Figure 4). Although relatively widely distributed in the Nashville area, the practice seems more common in the Eastern Highland Rim -- along the upper Cumberland River and its tributaries (including the Caney Fork). A final type of small stone lined grave was created to house secondary or bundle burials (Figure 5). In these cases, the skeletal remains of individuals were buried after the decay of the flesh. Although certainly varying in individual cases, this practice probably sometimes resulted from deaths far from home -- where the body was retrieved later as a bundle of skeletal remains for final interment. In other cases, the practice of retaining the honored dead in ossuaries or "bone houses" is relatively well documented for the southeastern United States. In these cases, bodies of honored ancestors and relatives were allowed to

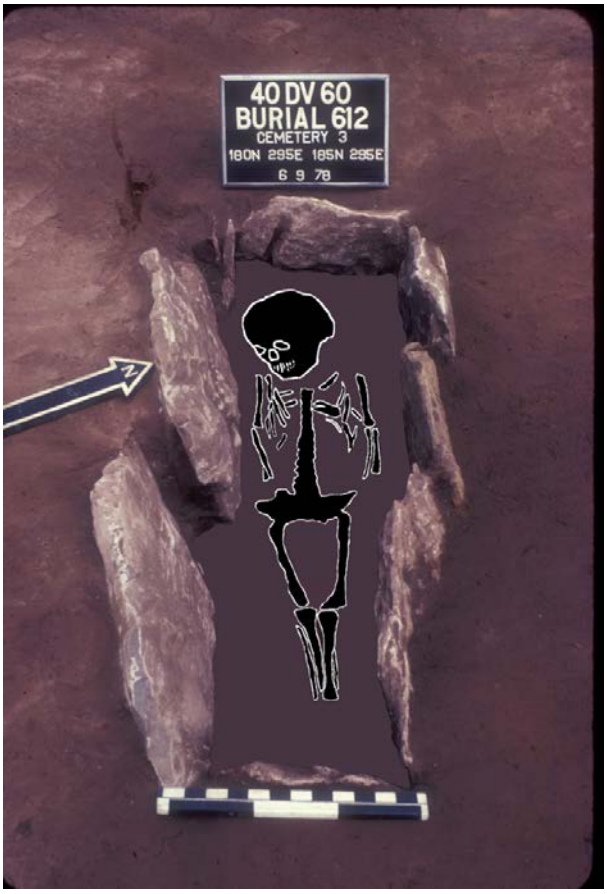

FIGURE 3. Stone grave of child, Averbuch site (40DV60), Davidson County, Tennessee.

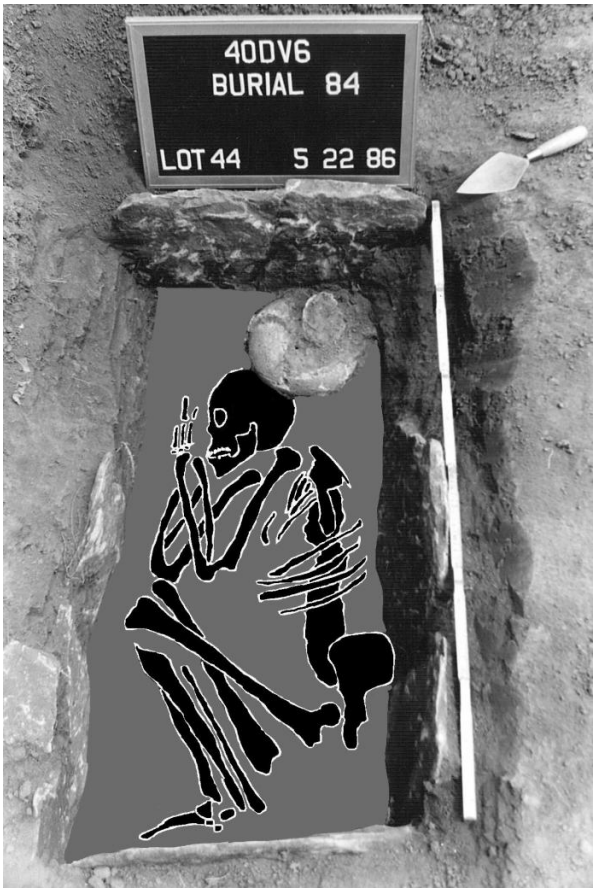

FIGURE 4. Stone-box grave containing flexed adult, Gordontown (40DV6), Davidson County, Tennessee.

FIGURE 5. Small rectangular stone box containing bundled remains of an adult male, 30-40 years of age at death, Gordontown (40DV6), Davidson County, Tennessee.

decay in special buildings until a designated time of reinterment. At least in this instance, science and folklore are in agreement -- the diminutive graves are real.

A final factor is also of importance in rooting this story so thoroughly in the local imagination. Although children, infants, and the bundled remains of adults were obviously buried in small graves throughout much of prehistoric North America, the practice of lining these small burial pits with stone slabs is rare outside the Cumberland River valley of Middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Their shallow placement and stone linings made their discovery using iron rods or probes a simple task -- and indeed this method is outlined in many of the early accounts. While skilled probers can readily discover multitudes of unlined burial pits, no skill whatsoever is required to recognize the solid clank of iron on the covering of a stone-lined grave. As a result, it was indeed possible along the Cumberland to quickly expose vast numbers of graves with little skill and a minimal expenditure of effort. Although it has been a felony since 1984 under Tennessee state law to disturb prehistoric human graves, modern looters persist in their illicit use of this method. Along the Cumberland, the "wee folk" are not simply the stuff of legends glimpsed on occasion -- they are, in fact, set in the reality of stone.

Unfortunately, it can hardly be asserted that our understanding of the prehistoric peoples along the edges of the Cumberland Plateau in Middle Tennessee has been much advanced by the conflict of folklore and science. In this peculiar instance, folklore guided scientific inquiry. The wholly unsystematic gathering of skeletons by the undoubtedly hundreds if not thousands of "scientific curiosity seekers" beginning in 1820 and continuing through the modern day led to the wholesale destruction of many of these very real archaeological sites. While Murfree (1891:360) concludes her novel with "Meanwhile the Little People sleep well," the sleep of the Little People has indeed been anything but quiet. The recurrent lure and mystery of the Tennessee Pygmy Graveyards led outsiders to search for and open grave after grave (soon described in the accounts as "reopening" grave after grave). Many of the archaeological sites mentioned over the decades have been so thoroughly disturbed by the curious, treasure seekers, antiquarians, and the plow that they cannot now be relocated. Three of the first four archaeological sites officially recorded in White County are the stone-box cemeteries associated in legend with the Doyle farm (40WH1), the Lane farm (40WH2), and the Sparkman farm (40WH4). Each is simply a placeholder number with the general

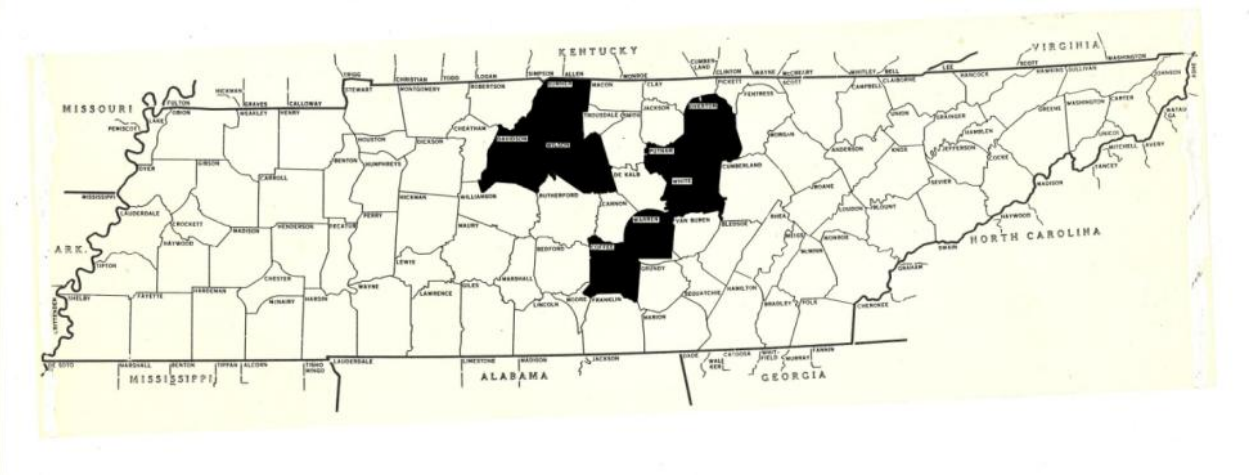

FIGURE 6. The "Land of the Tennessee Pygmies" as reported in identified newspaper accounts.

notation "unable to locate." Unfortunately, while many local inhabitants of the Upper Cumberland region respected the sleep of the "Little People," the story itself drew outsiders anxious to discover the "truth" for themselves.

What seems clear at this point is that the native peoples being buried along the eastern edge of the Central Basin of Tennessee between about A.D. 1100 and 1450 practiced a distinctive pattern or patterns of burial that set them apart from many of their contemporaries and neighbors -- as distinctive as the dialects, culture, and beliefs of the people of the southern Appalachian highlands that confronted George Featherstonhaugh in the early 1800s and so intrigued and fascinated Ms. Mary Murfree in the late 1800s. In the much better known region centered on modern Nashville, the dozens of vast stone grave cemeteries share two patterns significant to this discussion: 1) individuals were buried in "form fitting" stone-lined graves -- the dimensions being determined by the size of the individual to be interred; and 2) diminutive graves (other than those for children) are exceedingly rare with often only singular examples of semi-flexed burials or bundle burials present within individual sites or cemeteries. Even acknowledging the journalistic slant of many of the newspaper articles quoted herein, I suggest the possibility that they describe a mortuary pattern different from that of their neighbors to the west around Nashville. A significant number of the remains examined by more skeptical inquirers appear to reflect bundled burials of adults -- seemingly in much higher concentrations in the Upper Cumberland region than is reflected in the archaeological record around Nashville (Figure 6). While treading on or across the border between interpretation and speculation, I suggest that there may indeed be a scientific story here to rival that of the pygmies.

The core region within which significant numbers of diminutive graves were reported is along the western escarpment of the Cumberland Plateau. Modern archaeological research of the past three decades has revealed another pattern that overlaps substantially with that of the "pygmy graves." For thousands of years, native peoples of the region visited the rockshelters and dark zones of caves to incorporate these places into a

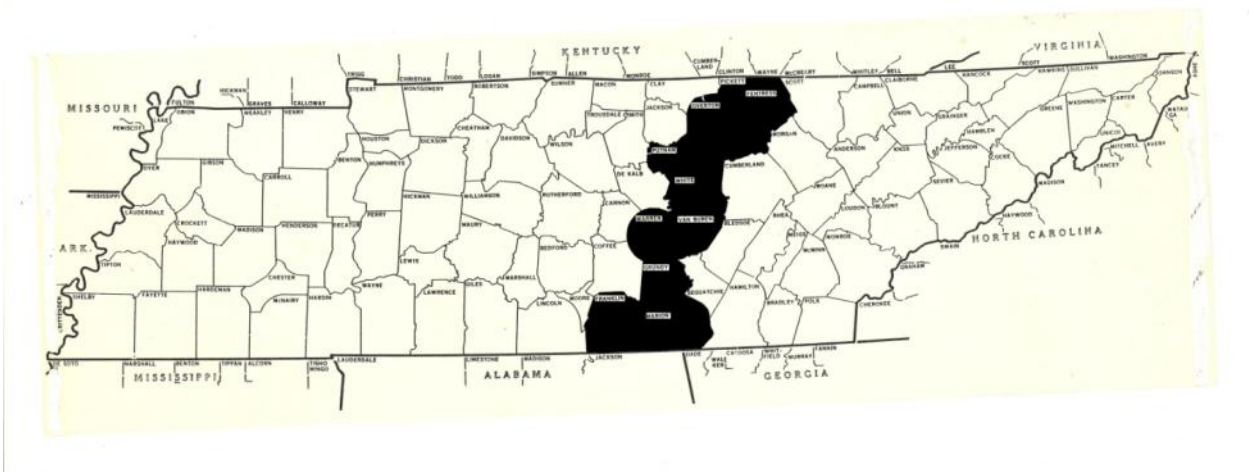

FIGURE 7. Densest concentration of known prehistoric cave and open air rock art sites in Tennessee.

sacred landscape -- a literal transformation of an enormous landscape into a reflection of their cosmic worldview (Figure 7; Simek et al. 2013). In the future, we should consider the question of whether this same region was chosen as a particularly significant place to transport and place the bundled remains of ancestors for final interment -- what might be described as a pilgrimage to the sacred mountains. If they did occur, the specific motivation for those pilgrimages remains elusive -- and whether this apparent correlation of concentrations of bundled adult burials and rock art is meaningful remains to be examined more thoroughly. As I have suggested elsewhere (Smith 2012; 2013a), there are tantalizing reasons to believe that some of the human bodies interred just inside the entrances of caves were placed as part of this enormous Cumberland Plateau tableau. In at least three instances, two individuals were buried in close proximity to one another -- probably in each case one male and one female. In each known example, at least one individual was clad in an elaborate feathered garment (in the two "mummified" examples, identified as a female). Also in each documented example, the bodies appear to have been elaborately wrapped with hides, furs, matting, and other organic materials. I suggest the possibility that those three pairs of burials represent the transformation of an adult male and a younger female into sacred bundles -- consecrating the entrance to these caves and rockshelters for an unknown (and perhaps unknowable) purpose. The elaborate wrapping containing multiple types of textiles, furs, and hides is a characteristic feature of sacred bundles. More convincing, however, is the final treatment -- placement within cane boxes. Surviving examples from sites such as the Great Mortuary at Spiro are clearly sacred bundles -- most of which contain human remains along with other sacred objects and regalia. Unfortunately, these three remarkable sets of bundles can, for the most part, only now be known from the scanty historical record. Nonetheless, the available evidence is sufficient to constitute an important addition to our growing recognition that native peoples in the region modified many features of the landscape to create monumental sacred tableaus through the patterned placement of bundles and rock art. Hence, it seems a

FIGURE 8. Comb style grave, Old Sparta Cemetery, White County, Tennessee (*Photograph, Kevin E. Smith*).

FIGURE 9. Comb style grave, end view, Old Sparta Cemetery, White County (*Photograph, Kevin E. Smith*).

workable hypothesis to suggest that the possible concentration of diminutive graves containing bundled adult remains along that same western escarpment is a related phenomenon.

One other pattern of burial -- this time historic -- also merits mention, as it leads one to ponder the extent of interpenetration of the pygmy cemetery legends into southern Appalachian cultural traditions. Historic graveyards of the Upper Cumberland are noteworthy for a distinctive style of grave covering known to old timers as a "comb grave," but sometimes referred to as "tent graves" (Finch 2004:68). A typical comb grave consists of two flat sandstone slabs leaned together to form a protective roof -- in the White and Warren county area, they are accompanied by triangular end stones to support the side slabs (Figures 8-9).[3] As noted by Finch (2004:72): "three questions are inescapable: how did the comb tradition arise, what purpose do the combs serve, and do comb graves exist anywhere else outside this region? Only the last question can be answered with certainty... the Cumberland region of Tennessee... has no significant competition for the comb grave championship." This distinctive grave pattern concentrated in Cannon, Fentress, Overton, Putnam, Warren, and White

counties along the western escarpment of the Cumberland Plateau seems to have emerged about 1822 (Finch 2004:69). Many scholars have speculated on the origins and functions of this unique and largely Upper Cumberland mortuary tradition, including protection from animals or the weather. While I can offer no more compelling proof of causation than earlier speculators, the geographic correlation of this regional mortuary pattern with that of the stories of stone-lined pygmy cemeteries -- and the seeming chronological emergence of both around 1820 -- seems curious if only coincidental.

Perhaps the well educated Turner Lane in his 1820 diggings did discover the skeleton of an ancient Native American exhibiting the effects of dwarfism. He may also have found the skeleton of a revered dog buried in a similar stone-lined grave. And perhaps amongst his other discoveries were the bodies of children, adults buried in flexed position, and secondary bundle burials. Most of those questions cannot today be answered -- the "pygmy remains" in question were discarded or misplaced, the sites and cemeteries have been plowed and pillaged in search of pygmy skeletons, and most of their explorers have long since departed this world. Perhaps Turner Lane's interpretations were influenced by beliefs in "wee folk" brought with him from his homeland in Ireland -- or perhaps not. Perhaps the local Native American stories of Little People mixed and mingled with Irish and other European folks beliefs in the Southern Appalachians -- or perhaps not. Whatever their origins, during her study of White County folklore In the 1960s, Edwina Doran (1969:39) noted that "the White County... pygmy legends have persisted to some degree in the oral and written tradition." As one of her informants noted, "I believe these were some of the Little People -- some kind of midgets or pygmies. Dr. Richards thought they were Indian babies, but I'd seed 'em and he hadn't, and he just had to take my word for it" (Doran 1969:38). The discovery of a prehistoric stone sculpture in White County in 1903 was quickly interpreted within the context of the pygmies. The heavily worn stone statue depicting a female quickly became known locally as "The Rock Woman" (Figure 10; Smith and Miller 2009:116-121). Local consultants described the stone statue as "It was bound to have been of the little race... She was probably one of the Mound Builders or one of the Little People" (Doran 1984:136). William Lynwood Montell (2004:122), folklorist and oral historian of the Upper Cumberland, deems "stories [or narratives] to be the strongest force in creating and maintaining a strong sense of identification with state, region, community, and home place that most of us know, appreciate, and understand." The pygmies of the Upper Cumberland underscore the strength and resilience of the local culture -- despite the relentless incursions of the "outsider." The periodic lure of Tennessee's primordial pygmies speaks to the failure of scientific stories to penetrate local lore. Recurrent statements about the lack of investigation of the pygmies by Science and Scientists underscores that failure. In her examination of *In the Stranger People's Country*, Marjorie Pryse (2000:202, 205) noted: "[Murfree's] interest in archaeology characterizes the encounter between science and legend as itself a contact zone for exploring competing claims to the authority over the interpretation of Appalachia.... Does the archaeologist's interest in the stranger peoples' graves represent the 'disinterested' claim of scientific inquiry or a version of cultural

disrespect that may be understood as a kind of theft?"

For nearly two centuries, all parties involved in this "contact zone" brought with them preconceptions and biases that colored their perceptions, interpretations, and actions. We can perhaps learn from their failures to appreciate and understand differing perspectives -- and move forward to protect, preserve, and expand our understanding of the prehistory of this important region in Middle Tennessee. Unless and until archaeologists can successfully produce and transmit an equally interesting story about the remarkable native inhabitants of the Caney Fork River drainage, it seems unlikely that this story will fade. Until the prehistoric peoples of the Caney Fork -- and more broadly the southeastern United States -- are historicized, they will more frequently be treated as the stuff of romance, legends and myth than of historical fact.

Tennessee's Pygmies remain alive and well today.

Notes

[1] The majority of dictionaries consulted cite "pygmy" as the preferred modern spelling with "pigmy" as a variant spelling. I have used "pygmy" in the text, but have retained the original spelling in direct quotations.

[2] *Zion's Herald* was one of the "oldest and greatest of the Methodist weekly magazines" (Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Electronic document, accessed 23 Jun 2013, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sf89090991/

[3] No doubt coincidentally, the comb grave illustrated here is only a few yards away from the graves of Turner Lane and William Anderson, whose farms contained the earliest reported of the "pygmy cemeteries."

Acknowledgements. My initial interest in the story of Tennessee's pygmies emerged during a 1986 conversation with Stephen Williams at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference in Nashville. The Pygmies remained a topic of intermittent research for almost three decades -- I particularly acknowledge the assistance of Stephen T. Rogers of the Tennessee Historical Commission over those years in forwarding relevant articles. Most recently, the widespread availability of on-line and searchable newspaper archives facilitated completion of the article at hand. Part of my interest also stems from my own deep roots in the southern Appalachians -- with thanks to Granny and Papa. I also extend thanks to George Lankford for his comments on an earlier draft of this article and to an anonymous reviewer whose comments helped to improve the content.

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